



News Release

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Some Utah Communities ‘Tip the Scales’ More Than Others

Utah Department of Health Releases Small Area Obesity Maps

(Salt Lake City, UT) – Utah’s obesity rates, like those of the nation, have increased dramatically in the past 20 years. In an effort to better understand the epidemic, the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) has developed small area obesity maps that show obesity rates for 61 designated areas of the state.

Telephone survey data collected from 2001-2004 show that obesity rates for the 61 areas ranged from a low of 8.8 percent in Salt Lake City’s Avenues to a high of 31.5 percent in Rose Park. The state rate during the same period was 19.5 percent. Six areas—the Avenues, Cottonwood, Summit County, Morgan/East Weber County, Downtown Salt Lake, and South Ogden—had obesity rates significantly lower than the state rate. Eight areas, including Tri-County Local Health District (Duchesne, Uintah, and Daggett Counties), Kearns, Provo South, Tooele County, West Valley I, Sandy Center, American Fork/Alpine, West Jordan North, and Rose Park, had obesity rates significantly higher than the state rate.

The 61 areas were determined by evaluating population size, political boundaries of cities and counties, and economic factors, and have populations ranging from 20,000 to 60,000 people. The varying obesity rates among the small areas raise the question of what makes some communities more obese than others.

When UDOH researchers examined age, race, ethnicity, income, education and household size from census data, only age and the percent of residents with a college education were statistically related to the differences in obesity rates between the small areas. Those areas with a younger population and more women with a college education had lower rates of obesity. But there are other factors to consider besides age and education.

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“Obesity is related to individual behaviors and demographics such as age, race, education and income,” said Michael Friedrichs, UDOH Epidemiologist. “We can measure those things with survey data. However, obesity is also related to the physical environment and other factors in communities that are more difficult to measure. Research from the U.S. and Australia has shown that certain community characteristics are associated with obesity levels.”

Those recent studies have shown that urban sprawl is associated with increased body weight. People living in sprawling communities with greater distances between homes, schools, and businesses are more likely to be overweight than those living in more compact, urban communities. In these urban communities, people are more likely to walk for leisure or for day-to-day purposes such as going to school, work or shopping. People who have poor access to recreational facilities and sidewalks, including sidewalks on only one side of the street, are statistically more likely to be overweight.

“Having better information about what influences weight is critical to our efforts to prevent obesity,” said Dr. David Sundwall, Executive Director, UDOH. “We are continually searching for ways to make it easier to make healthy choices when eating, either at home or “out”, and to be physically active. As we look more closely at these communities, we will be able to identify the factors that seem to help people achieve healthier weights. Once we know what works best, we can then educate policy makers and citizens in the communities at higher risk, and work with them to incorporate the factors that seem most beneficial.”

For more information on obesity and to access the maps, visit www.health.utah.gov/obesity

Editor’s Note:

For more information on Utah’s small areas and how they were established, visit

www.health.utah.gov/opha/IBIShelp/sarea/UtahSmallAreaInfo.pdf or

www.health.utah.gov/opha/IBIShelp/sarea/SmallAreaAnalysis.htm .

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public’s health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death; assuring access to affordable, quality health care; and promoting healthy lifestyles.